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THE LAND-BASED MEF: OPERATIONALLY CAPABLE OR SITUATIONALLY
OPERATIONAL?

by

Timothy S. Muchmore
Major, U.S. Army

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War
College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the
Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal
views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War
College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Timothy S. Muchmore

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Abstract of
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The warfighting doctrine of the U.S. Marine Corps emphasizes maneuver and the indirect approach. However, it fails to define and explain how the Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) fight at the operational level. There is a corresponding vacuum of articles written by Marine officers on the operational level of war and published in military journals. Capable as the MAGTFs may be afloat, on land against a sophisticated threat the MAGTF loses its operational edge. Shortfalls in the areas of operational fires and sustainment, coupled with limited tactical mobility, prevent the land-based Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) from fighting at the operational level.

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THE LAND-BASED MEF: OPERATIONALLY CAPABLE OR SITUATIONALLY OPERATIONAL?

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Perhaps most important, a MAGTF commander must be prepared to articulate the most effective operational employment of his MAGTF in a joint or combined campaign. If he cannot, he will in effect depend on the other services to understand fully the capabilities of the MAGTF and employ it correctly, an assumption which is likely to prove unwarranted."¹

In 1986, the United States Army unveiled the second version of its updated and modernized warfighting doctrine, AirLand Battle. It envisions a more dynamic and lethal battlefield than in past conflicts and "reflects the structure of modern warfare, the dynamics of combat power, and the application of the classical principles of war to contemporary battlefield requirements. It is called AirLand Battle in recognition of the inherently three-dimensional nature of modern warfare."² AirLand Battle also resurrects the operational level of war, absent from US military writings since World War II. It emphasizes the role of the corps commander and fighting at the operational level, and demonstrates how Army combined arms forces fight as part of a joint/combined operation.

As the nation's land combat fighting force, the Army's doctrine serves as the nation's basic warfighting doctrine for large-scale, prolonged conflicts on land. However, the US forces that will fight this conflict are not limited to

the Army. The US Marine Corps can be expected to play a vital role if for no other reason than the fact that it exists, is ready for deployment/employment, and offers some distinct employment options that cannot be found within the other armed services.

If the leaders of the Marine Corps have the responsibility to educate their non-Marine counterparts and superiors, can the non-Marine leaders depend on the Marines to understand fully their capabilities and limitations, and more importantly, how they can contribute effectively to a theater campaign? If the writings of Marine Corps officers and supporters in professional journals are indicative of the degree of serious thought being given to the operational level of war, we all have reason to be concerned. There exists a general absence of professional thought by Marines in military journals on the operational level of war. In preparation for an article subsequently published in The Marine Corps Gazette ("MAGTFs and the Operational Level of War") in July 1989, Colonel Roger M. Jaroch wrote:

"In attempting to define the scope of the problem for this article, this author made a totally subjective attempt to see where Marine officers stood in terms of understanding the operational level of war and operational art. All editions of the principal U.S. military journals published since 1986 were examined to acquire a sense of the maturity of this concept within the Marine Corps. To my surprise, I found 57 articles dealing directly with the issues of the operational level of war and operational art, the preponderance of which (50) were published in Parameters, Army, Military Review, and Air University Review (now Airpower Journal). Of even greater surprise was the fact that, during this same period, none had been published in the Gazette or Proceedings."³

The trend that Colonel Jaroch discovered in 1989 continues to this day. There were few articles written by Marine Corps officers on a subject relating to the operational level of war since Colonel Jaroch published his effort. What has been written is generally fluff, declaring only that the Marine Corps is capable of fighting at the operational level, but not discussing the Corps' capabilities and limitations to do so, or its capacity to integrate its effort into a larger operation.

This paper will answer the question, "Is the land-based MEF operationally capable or situationally operational?" Capabilities and limitations of the MEF will be explored, specifically in the context of its potential contributions to the theater commander's campaign in a sustained conflict against a technologically advanced enemy in the desert environment. More specifically, one could title this paper "Everything General Schwarzkopf (CINC, USCENTCOM) Needs to Know About the MEF on Land."

Chapter II of this paper will review and assess the Marine Corps' warfighting doctrine, and Chapter III will look at the basic warfighting structure of the Corps, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF). Chapter IV will address capabilities and limitations of the MEF (remembering that the focus is on a land campaign in a desert environment), while Chapter V will reflect those insights gained from this effort as well as specifically answer the

underlying question of this paper, "Is the land-based MEF operationally capable or situationally operational?"

CHAPTER II

USMC DOCTRINE

"...Marine Corps doctrine today is based on warfare by maneuver."¹

"...warfare by maneuver stems from a desire to circumvent a problem and attack it from a position of advantage rather than meet it straight on."²

"The object of maneuver is not so much to destroy physically as it is to shatter the enemy's cohesion, organization, command, and psychological balance. Successful maneuver depends on the ability to identify and exploit enemy weakness, not simply on the expenditure of superior might. To win by maneuver, we cannot substitute numbers for skill. Maneuver thus makes a greater demand on military judgment."³

Fleet Marine Force Manual 1 (FMFM 1), Warfighting, is billed as the capstone document for the warfighting doctrine of the Marine Corps. It is essentially philosophical in nature and draws heavily on the historical principles of war and the classical military thinkers like Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. It avoids detail, and emphasizes the leader's ability to distill the philosophy into practical application. It is well written insofar as it goes, but it fails badly in its attempt to define and explain the warfighting doctrine of the Marine Corps. As close as it gets to a doctrinal discussion is to state that the Marine Corps uses maneuver-style warfare over the more clumsy and costly attrition-style warfare. Following its publication, FMFM 1 received scant comment in the military journals. But what most thinkers/writers agreed on was that it was nothing new and was unimaginative. It fails to articulate a unifying doctrine for Marine Corps operations and does not

emphasize the real-world linkages of the joint and combined arms battlefield.

Following FMFM 1 came FMFM 1-1, Campaigning. It claims to establish "the authoritative doctrinal basis for military campaigning in the Marine Corps, particularly as it pertains to a Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) conducting a campaign or contributing to a campaign by a higher authority".⁴ Like its capstone document, FMFM 1-1 falls well short of its mark. It also is thick in warfighting principles at the operational level, but to its credit, uses many historical examples to apply and demonstrate those principles. Unfortunately, it lacks the spirit of a warfighting doctrinal manual. It fails to explain "how" the Marine Corps fights at the operational level, and lacks a contemporary feel. There are few examples of how the MAGTF commander integrates and synchronizes his forces to accomplish the operational aim. The following are the most specific illustrations presented in FMFM 1-1:

"In advance he [the operational commander] seeks to shape events to create the most favorable conditions possible for those combat actions he chooses to fight. Likewise he seeks to anticipate the results of combat and to be prepared to exploit them to the greatest advantage."⁵

"Organizationally, the MAGTF is uniquely equipped to perform a flexible variety of tactical actions, amphibious, air, and land, and to focus those actions into a unified scheme. The MAGTF's organic aviation allows the commander to project power well in advance of close combat, to shape events in time and space. The headquarters organization, with separate headquarters for the tactical control of ground and air actions, can free the MAGTF command element to focus on the operational conduct of war."⁶

"...the MAGTF commander can use the inherent reach of his organic aviation to see and shape the course of the campaign in time and space well in

advance of the close combat of ground forces. This reach applies not only to the direct application of aviation combat power, but also to the range it provides ground forces as well. Such activities include attempting to ascertain the enemy's operational intentions; delaying enemy reinforcements by interdiction; degrading critical enemy functions or capabilities such as command and control, offensive air support, or logistics; and manipulating the enemy's perceptions."

In sum, it appears to this author that a distinct problem exists within the Marine Corps' doctrinal publications. Either the Corps is unable to fight at the operational level or it does not understand how it able to fight at the operational level. The lack of combined arms and joint flavor in the Corps' two primary doctrinal publications is disconcerting at best, and at worst may reflect an unwarranted elitist attitude. This may be an overstatement, but in comparison to the detail promulgated in the Army's Field Manual 100-5, Operations, the Corps' manuals are lacking. It may be this lack of doctrinal detail or focus that accounts for the lack of articles of substance in military journals regarding the Corps' warfighting capabilities at the operational level.

CHAPTER III

MARINE CORPS ORGANIZATION

FMFM 1 does, however, introduce the warfighting organization of the Marine Corps. It states that the

"Fleet Marine Forces must be organized to provide forward-deployed or rapidly-deployable forces capable of mounting expeditionary operations in any environment. This means that, in addition to maintaining their unique amphibious capability, the Fleet Marine Forces must maintain a capability to deploy by whatever means is appropriate to the situation."¹

This statement of requirement is translated into the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF).

"MAGTFs are task organizations consisting of ground, aviation, combat service support, and command components. They have no standard structure, but rather are constituted as appropriate for the specific situation. The MAGTF provides a single commander the optimum combined-arms force for the situation he faces. As the situation changes, it may of course be necessary to restructure the MAGTF."²

From the non-Marine perspective, I must admit at this point that it appears that we have a Marine Corps without a unifying warfighting doctrine and without a structured organization. Flexibility in task organization is emphasized repeatedly in FMFM 1, but flexibility can only go so far in compensating for a lack of doctrine and habitual relationships in force structure. It appears clear that both the doctrine and flexible force structure of the Marine Corps are hinged on the unstated assumption that any threat that it will likely face in the future will be technologically simple and militarily inferior. In such a case, the bold and imaginative Marine force commander,

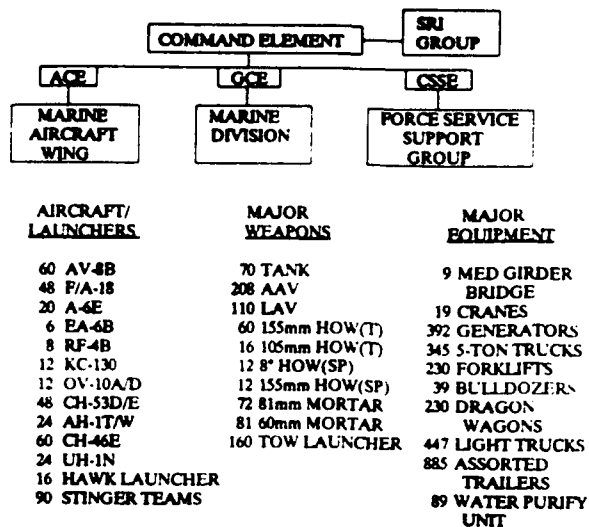
employing his flexible and changing task organization, will be able to out-maneuver and out-fight his opponent. Reality requires us to take a closer look, starting with the organization of the MAGTF.

There are three basic types of MAGTFs: the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), and the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The MEF is built around a Marine Division and a Marine Air Wing. A MEB is organized around a Marine Brigade and an Air Group, while the MEU is built around a reinforced Marine Infantry Battalion and a composite helicopter/fixed-wing aircraft squadron.

The organization and major equipment items of a notional MEF are shown at Figures 1³ and 2⁴. Each MEF is capable of task organizing into two MEBs or assorted MEUs to fit the requirements of the theater CINC and to best oppose the anticipated threat. Elements from one MEF can also be attached to another MEF, but for the purposes of this study, only those elements normally found within the organization of the notional MEF will be considered.

Now that we know some of the terminology, what exactly is a MAGTF?

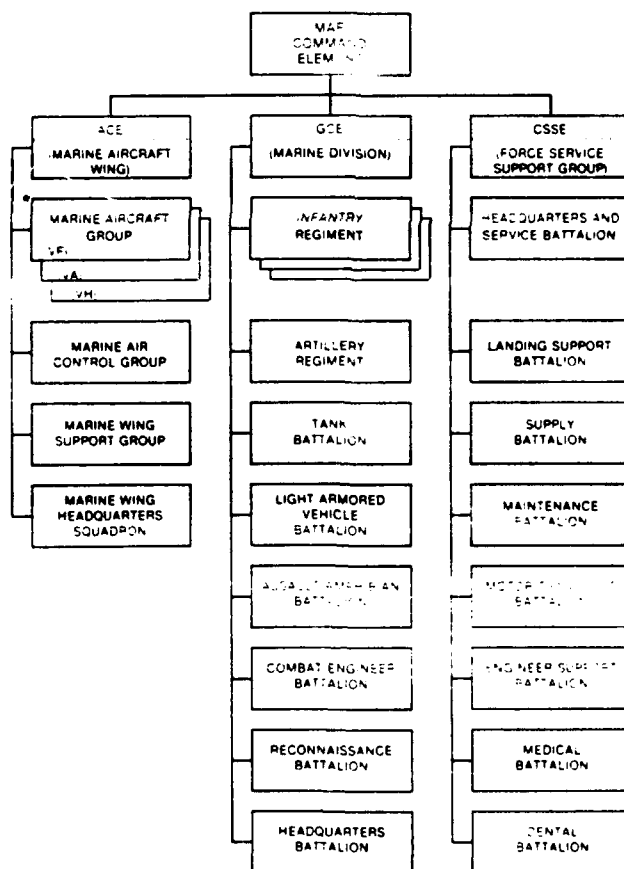
"A MAGTF is an integrated, balanced air-ground combined arms force organized for combat with its own combat service support element (CSSE). The Commanding General of each FMF can task-organize MAGTF's required by the assigned mission. MAGTF's are employed to apply ground combat power supported by the MAGTF's own aviation combat element and CSSE."⁵
"The MAGTF structure includes four major elements: a command element and subordinate ground combat, aviation combat, and combat service



NOTES:

Task organized to accomplish specific missions.
 Structure can vary from organization shown.
 Approximate personnel: 45,000 USMC
 2,600 USN

Figure 1. Notional MEF



- VF Marine Fixed-Wing Fighter Aircraft
- VA Marine Fixed-Wing Attack Aircraft
- VH Marine Helicopter Aircraft

Figure 2. Notional Marine Amphibious Force.

support elements."⁶ "The MAGTF is structured and equipped for amphibious operations and defense of advanced naval bases in support of a naval campaign. It is also capable of sustained operations ashore in support of a land campaign as part of a larger joint or combined force."⁷ "MAGTF's participating in protracted land operation require a functioning logistical pipeline and an in-theater reception and distribution system. This is a function of the Army."⁸

Based on the MAGTF doctrine of Operational Handbook Number 2 (OH 2), The Marine Air-Ground Task Force, it appears that the MAGTF organization was designed specifically for the Corps' primary function, amphibious operations. It does however have limited utility in support of land campaigns. According to OH 2, the MAGTF can be employed in the following manners:

STRATEGIC DECEPTION-- to force the opponent to disperse forces along all vulnerable littorals.

RAIDS-- to destroy installations, units, or individuals which may have a significant bearing on the course of the campaign.

FORCIBLE ENTRY-- to establish beachheads, to gain enclaves for introduction of large-scale U.S. forces.

EXTRACTIONS-- to evacuate an expeditionary force.

STRATEGIC RESERVE-- to exploit opportunities and counter threats which develop during the course of the campaign.

NAVAL CAMPAIGN-- to control a landward flank of a naval campaign.⁹

An examination of the notional MEF organization reveals several points that may have operational significance:

- All artillery systems are within the division.

There are no ground systems at MEF level for operationally deep fires.

- All aviation lift assets are outside the Marine Division organization.

- The nine battalions of Marine infantry (organized into three Marine Infantry Regiments) are foot mobile. The battalions have no organic transportation assets.

- The Headquarters Battalion of the Marine Division has one truck company with approximately 100 2 1/2 ton trucks with the mission of providing "sufficient general support motor transport to produce the initial logistical support necessary to conduct limited tactical mobility".¹⁰

- The battalions of the Artillery Regiment "possess sufficient organic transportation to displace the headquarters and firing batteries in a single echelon."¹¹

- The Assault Amphibian Battalion of the division contains 208 amphibious tractors, 187 of which are configured for troop transportation. Each vehicle can carry 25 Marines and provides land mobility equal to that of the tanks of the tank battalion.

- The Light Armored Vehicle Battalion consists of 110 light armored vehicles designed around a common platform but tailored for specific roles (56 with 25mm chain gun, 16 with antitank missiles, 8 with an 81mm mortar, 8 for command and control, 16 for logistics, and 6 for maintenance/recovery). Each of the LAV-25s also carries a dismount element of 4-6 Marines.

- Each CH-46E helicopter can carry approximately 25 Marines or 6700 pounds of cargo.

- Each of the 32 CH-53D helicopters can carry 37 combat troops or 13,300 pounds of cargo, while each of the 16 CH-53Es can carry 56 troops or 16 tons of externally loaded cargo.

- There are no separate units with the function of NBC defense.

- All air defense systems are located within the Aviation Combat Element (ACE).

- Only 24 of the 100 artillery pieces are self-propelled with limited overhead protection from fragmentation.

CHAPTER IV

CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE MEF

"In large, theater level operations, it is unlikely that MAGTFs will be employed in the high-intensity environment associated with continental land forces. Marine forces are too lightly structured to fight effectively in such an environment; to have them do so, a CinC would be sacrificing most of the advantages they bring to his theater. Indeed, it is these forces that can provide flexibility, striking power, increased reach, and surprise that cannot be duplicated to the same degree by other forces."¹

We've finally arrived at the crux of the problem, trying to determine the capabilities and limitations of this unique force we call a MEF. From the viewpoint of the operational commander, the following are the capabilities and limitations of the MEF in the desert environment, fighting against a sophisticated enemy.

CAPABILITIES

1. By virtue of its habitual relationship with the theater-level naval forces, the MEF can best occupy littoral areas, denying them to the enemy while simultaneously maintaining contact with the afloat naval forces. This allows the MEF to take full advantage of the naval gunfire support available and to incorporate naval aircraft into the MEF commander's concept of the operation.

2. The MEF can project a substantial part of its force forward over the battlefield due to its organic lift assets. Theoretically, the lift assets can transport an entire

Marine Infantry Regiment in one lift. All of the towed artillery and LAV variants are also air transportable by lift assets organic to the MEF. This gives the CINC the ability to place large numbers of fighters deep in the enemy's rear at operationally significant points, such as airfields, logistic centers, and critical transportation nodes.

3. The MEF can conduct a coordinated operation with a Marine force that may be afloat. Obvious as this may sound, Army forces are not trained or equipped to do likewise without significant additional training and resources.

4. The land-based MEF can conduct limited amphibious operations in concert with air insertions using its organic assault amphibious vehicles and lift assets. It can deploy from its littoral bases, move out into the water, and maneuver around enemy elements on the coastline, conducting an amphibious landing distant from its land bases. Once done, it can quickly transfer its line of communication and supply, thereby opening another front, possibly for the follow-on introduction of additional Marine and Army forces.

5. The MEF can defend small land areas of operational significance, especially where the terrain denies tactical mobility to the enemy. Coastlines and urban areas in the desert are examples of this.

6. The MEF can conduct limited raids and spoiling attacks against the enemy by coordinating its land, air, and amphibious capabilities. In this regard, the MEF's capability exceeds that of the Army's airborne division. Limited operational fires can be achieved by air insertion of towed artillery assets into the enemy's rear.

LIMITATIONS

1. The MEF cannot defend a large ground area against an attacking armored/mechanized force. The MEF is not impotent in the antitank area, but lacks the tactical and operational mobility to prevent itself from being bypassed. The MEF lacks the combat power of standing toe-to-toe against a determined and organized armored force. It is this fact that requires the CINC to carefully select the area in which he will employ the MEF. A comment made by Edward Luttwak about the Army's light divisions is particularly appropriate here as well. "Obviously if light division forces are placed in flat, trafficable terrain against Soviet armored forces, they would be smashed by artillery and overrun by armor."²

2. The MEF is potentially weak in the fire support arena. The ACE provides a considerable close air support capability, but is more limited by the extreme weather conditions (eg: sandstorms) than is tube artillery. Only 24

of the 100 tubes of artillery are self-propelled and provide any overhead protection to the crews. This limits the high tempo ground maneuver that the MEF can conduct without resorting to vertical lift assets and towed artillery. The vertical lift assets are also dependent on the weather conditions, especially the desert heat that can seriously reduce lift capacity. Operational fires must come from the ACE since the MEF's tube artillery is limited in range. As the Army's Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) is incorporated into the Corps' force structure (replacing all self-propelled artillery by FY 96³), the quantity and depth of fires will be enhanced. See Figure 3 for a comparison of MLRS and tube artillery.

MLRS		155mm howitzer
30+ kilometers	Range	17.5 kilometers
644 DPICM		88 DPICM
Per Rocket	Submunitions	Per Round
1 Rocket	Equals	7.32 Rounds
1 Launcher	Equals	3.6 Bn Volleys*
1 Battery (9 launchers)	Equals	33 Bn Volleys*

*24 Gun 155mm Artillery Battalion

Figure 3. MLRS vs Tube Artillery⁴

3. The MEF is weak in NBC defense. There are no dedicated organic NBC units within the MEF. Detection and decontamination teams do exist, but primarily they are formed as needed from existing assets. This means that in order to decontaminate large amounts of personnel and equipment, the MEF commander will have to draw Marines away

from their primary tasks and hastily task organize the structures to accomplish the decontamination mission. It is apparent that the Corps has not placed much emphasis on its having to fight in a contaminated environment. Individual soldiers are trained and equipped to protect themselves, but the MEF organization does not reflect a recognition of the potential magnitude of the problem when fighting a sophisticated enemy. Additionally, no mention is made of NBC capabilities/requirements in FMFMs 1 or 1-1, or in OH 2. This is an indication that the basic doctrine of the Corps does not reflect the realities of the NBC battlefield. It may also be a friendly vulnerability that the CINC must take action to protect.

4. The MEF commander has reduced capability at his level to fight the operational battle. Clearly the GCE and the ACE are being synchronized by the MEF commander, but once committed, the MEF commander is resource poor. He does not possess any additional assets at the MEF level that he can transfer within the force structure to achieve his desired objectives. Essentially he fights the operational battle through the ACE and the GCE. His only tool for adding weight to an operation is through the apportionment of air resources.

5. The MEF lacks the capability to handle and process large numbers of enemy prisoners of war without diverting

personnel resources from their primary assignments. Organic to the MEF is only one Military Police company.

6. The MEF lacks sustainability for extended operations. It must be supported by theater Army forces.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

"Certain functions allow the operational commander to directly influence the outcome of the operation...They are intelligence, maneuver, fires, sustainment, and deception."¹

Based on my research and analysis, it is clear that the MAGTF organization in low- to mid-intensity conflicts gives the MAGTF commander the ability to achieve strategic aims. Accepting that the operational level of war is not defined solely by the size of forces involved, the breadth of territory contested, or the duration of the conflict, but rather by the military use of force to achieve strategic aims, it is clear that the MEF commander has sufficient capability at his disposal to plan and conduct a successful campaign. However, he is unable to do so when his enemy is equally large, sophisticated, and able to invest considerable resources and time into the conflict.

In the scenario of this study, we have focused on the MEF's ability to fight operationally in the desert environment against a sophisticated enemy. A closer analysis of the operational functions as presented in Army FM 100-6 should help to clarify the argument.

"Intelligence at the operational level of war must probe the mind of the enemy commander."² The intelligence assets of the MAGTF that are ideal for developing tactical intelligence fall short when the intelligence picture is

expanded to include political, economic, religious, and cultural factors. For this reason, the operational commander "requires access to information normally obtainable only through strategic collection assets."³ If provided this detailed national intelligence, the MAGTF organization is capable of integrating it into the campaign plan.

At the operational level, "forces maneuver both to secure the advantages of position before battle is joined and to exploit tactical success to achieve strategic results."⁴ The Corps' FMFM 1-1 states that the aim of operational maneuver is "to reduce the amount of fighting necessary to accomplish the mission. By operational maneuver, we seek to gain an advantage which bears directly on the outcome of the campaign or in the theater as a whole."⁵ Given the proper circumstances, the many lift assets of the ACE, coupled with the air transportability of much of the combat equipment of the GCE, gives the MEF commander the ability to maneuver operationally.

"Fires are considered operational when their application constitutes a decisive impact on the conduct of a campaign or major operation."⁶ It is in this area that I believe the MEF falls short. The only operational fires available to the MEF commander are in the ACE. They have a limited capacity to provide continuous and sustained fires. If the threat is not too sophisticated or the conflict is

not too long, the MEF commander can employ his ACE to provide operational fires. However, in our scenario, this is a shortfall.

Operational sustainment was addressed early on and clearly is a weakness of a MEF fighting a sustained land battle. The MEF must establish its ACE and FSSG on land as soon as possible, and soon thereafter is dependent on theater forces (read Army) to provide the sustaining base. Without the sustaining base, the MEF's sustainment would have to be provided by naval assets. This shortfall is recognized in FMFM 1-1: "The logistical system organic to a MAGTF is primarily tactical in nature, designed to support the MAGTF within the confines of the beachhead. Thus, the MAGTF commander waging a campaign beyond the beachhead must construct a logistical apparatus primarily from external sources, such as through host nation support, inter-Service agreements, or local procurement."⁷

"Deception at the operational level seeks to facilitate the prosecution of a major operation or campaign by manipulating the enemy's perceptions and expectations."⁸ Given its varied capability to operationally maneuver troops (air, land, and sea), the MEF is capable of conducting deception operations at the operational level of war. The MEF will require input from or access to national intelligence assets to ensure that the deception is properly planned, executed, and targetted at the right individual.

So, is the land-based MEF operationally capable or situationally operational? It is evident to this author that the lack of tactical mobility and firepower when fighting against a sophisticated enemy in a desert environment, substantially limits the MEF's capability to fight operationally. When the enemy is not well organized, trained, equipped, and led, the MEF is able to exploit fully its operational capabilities. But when the threat is equally determined and sophisticated, the MEF's operational capabilities are situationally dependent.

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